

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 11

November 2007

## November FIG Meeting: *Enjoy your Harvest Festivities!*

There will be **NO** Fig Meeting in November so as not to interfere with the Harvest Festival Celebrations/Thanksgiving.

### December Meeting

Tues. 11 Dec. 2007 at 7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor ←-Note Early Date

#### Christmas in America:

##### Origins, Myths, Fashions, and (Oh, my!) The Truth.

About the phony "war" on our most popular holiday

**Speaker:** Conrad Goeringer

The "War on Christmas" has become part of the American cultural divide. But have we really "taken Christ out of Christmas"? In fact, the invention and celebration of this popular holiday has reflected the economic, social and cultural changes occurring throughout American history. Beginning with Puritan sobriety and the rituals of misrule in the 19th century; the Christmas season evolved into a commercial festival stressing bourgeois propriety, commercialism, domesticity, and the re-invention of public space. Today, discourse and controversy about Christmas mirrors popular angst over issues such as secularization and the increasingly diverse demographic make-up of America.

**Conrad Goeringer** is Director of Public Policy for American Atheists, and staff writer for the American Atheist magazine. His writings focus on the intersection between culture, religion and politics.

**January Meeting:** Tues. 22 Jan. 2008 at 7:00PM at the Vernon Manor

#### *The Lion's Way*

Speaker: Peter Lloyd

Our fellow Fig member has written a new book he will tell us about. The Roman Empire has not fallen. It thrives, having conquered the world under an enlightened political policy called *Empathia*, inspired by an all-but-forgotten Jesus. Never crucified, Jesus was kidnapped at the peak of his popularity by the emperor Tiberius, who used his revolutionary and empathetic ideas to rehabilitate the Roman Empire.

Our story begins some 700 years later. Without a Church or Dark Ages to impede its progress, the Roman Republic has conquered space and achieved scientific success far beyond what we enjoy today. However, most of the Jesus-inspired *Empathia* has been corrupted or forgotten.

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### Events

#### November Potluck

Tuesday, November 13, 2007,  
6:30 PM at the home of

#### November Meeting

*No Meeting*

*Enjoy your Harvest Festivities!*

#### December Potluck

*No Potluck*

*See you at the meeting!!*

#### December Meeting

Tuesday, December 11, 2007, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## October Meeting

### Jack London, Author and Heretic

Tim Madigan, Professor of Philosophy, St. John Fisher College

Tim started with a paraphrase of a statement Tom Lehrer made about Mozart: "When Jack London was my age, he was already 5 years dead." He died at the age of 40. He lived from 1876 to 1916, and he packed a tremendous amount of living into that brief time. He is probably best known for the novel *Call of the Wild* and his adventure stories, but Tim emphasized work which had to do with freethought.

Warren Allen Smith wrote two books: *Who's Who in Hell* and *Celebrities in Hell*. Warren was aware that with artists it's hard to know what their exact views are. Philosophers like to pretend to precision, so if you say "What do you believe?" they like to give definitions, but artists are messier. So to claim Jack London was a humanist, he was,

but he was other things as well. It is impossible to be sure what his views were regarding metaphysics, a soul of some kind maybe? but up until his death, he was quite explicit to be an atheist; he did not believe in any personal creator and in that regard he would fit within the humanist pantheon. London himself attributed a tremendous change in his life to experiences in Buffalo, where he was thrown into jail for thirty days. Prison made him a philosopher, socialist and extreme critic of the government of the day.

Jack London was very much a self made man. He created his own persona, and lived almost long enough to see himself become a mythical figure. He became even more so after his death. He was very much self taught. Much of his learning came from his reading, including reading various philosophers. We may think of him as an uneasy mixture, rugged self determined individualism and yet a fighter for the poor and downtrodden. These two don't go together very well and London was aware of this, but the power of his writing comes through this disharmony. Two of the great influences on London were the writers Karl Marx and Herbert Spenser. As you may be aware, Marx and Spenser were diametrically opposed in their views. Marx talked about the needed social and economic changes that would bring a classless society; while Spenser emphasized the "survival of the fittest" in that government should interfere as little as possible with the struggle among individuals.

London's own writing has influenced many others. Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, and Norman Mailer stand in the tradition of London, the idea of the individual hitting the road, creating his existence, through physical activity including boxing, bull-fighting, traveling around the world. London certainly did all of these things and his ideas have influenced modern Americans.

Critics of London often pointed out how his stories reflected Marx or Nietzsche; even before he had read these writers. There was something, a sort of Zeitgeist in which he lived, the time right after the Civil War, right before America became a great world power. He absorbed the tension and difficulties that were America. He was in many ways a tortured individual. A man, trying to find who he was and trying to create a persona because he thought he didn't really know who he was. One reason was his rather unconventional upbringing. His eccentric mother, Flora Wellman, had a checkered past. Biographers are not clear about her relationships with various men. She was a music teacher but also a spiritualist during the heyday of the spiritualist movement. London grew up in a household with his mother's spirit rapping, or people would come to have their palms read. He became a great rationalist and opponent of the supernatural because his mother was ripping people off. After they left she would refer to them as suckers. This definitely helped shape him.



**FIG Leaves** - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to:

figinfo@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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Another thing that really shook him was to find out at age 12, from some busybodies in the San Francisco neighborhood, that the man he thought was his father, was not. John London, who had raised him, was really his step-father. His mother had already given birth to him when she met Mr. London and no one really knew who his natural father was. The most likely suspect was William Chaney. He was an astrologer, a con artist, a man who spent a lot of time on the road a step ahead of the law. London eventually tracked him down and wrote to him "I believe you may be my father." Most of his biographers seem to think he was. Chaney wrote back that he knew his mother but could not be his father because he was impotent at the time; and his mother really slept around a lot and he could give him a list of men who might be his father. London never did find out who his father was. To his dying day he never knew.

At the age of 16, he went to Japan and became a seal hunter. He describes in rather gory detail what that was all about. He really enjoyed this kind of vigorous living. He also had moral qualms. He knew that his stepfather was dying, his stepsisters needed help and that his mother was unlikely to find another husband so he returned to Oakland and went back to a factory type of job. Since he had tasted freedom he no longer wanted to do this sort of job and later he was to write an essay, *How I Became a Socialist*. In the beginning paragraph he says:

It was around this time in my life that I really started to think deeply about not just how exploited I was but how exploited hundreds if not thousands and millions of people were so it is quite fair to say that I became a socialist in a fashion similar to the way in which the Teutonic pagans became Christians, it was hammered into me. Not only was I not looking for socialism at the time of my conversion, but I was fighting it. I was very young and callow, did not know much of anything and that I had never even heard of a school called "individualism," I sang the paean of the squaw with all my heart. Later this would have been called the Nietzschean, somebody called the superman but I didn't know these terms and wasn't particularly concerned yet about the exploitation of the masses...

He left the factory and became a hobo. In 1894 he joined Coxey's Army to march on Washington to demand better wages and treatment for workers. He spent several months just living hand to mouth, riding the rails, getting to know the hobo culture. He wrote later, "I had a very good time doing this, and I wanted to see Niagara Falls. I heard about it and I wanted to look at the wonders of Niagara Falls and like most people was astounded by it. As a hobo, I just found a field to lay down in and if I had just left that morning, everything would have been fine but I wanted to see the Falls once more, I couldn't resist and I went back and lo and behold there was a policeman who arrested me

for vagrancy." He was sentenced to thirty days which consisted primarily of building the Erie Canal using the prisoners as labor. To survive London became a trustee with the mandate to "keep the other prisoners in line." He was one of 13 such trustees. He later wrote about his prison experiences in *The Road*.

After prison he went back to Oakland and returned to high school. He was already about 17 or so and he said: "I realized that I needed to get an education. I was bright but I wasn't educated and I would never be able to rise out of this pit unless I did something." He was a man of great will. He earned a high school diploma. He decided to go to college and did go to Berkeley for one semester. But he also decided that since he was still young and in good health there were other adventures he could get into. His most famous, he traveled to the gold mines of the Klondike. There he developed a bad case of scurvy, some of his teeth came out, and in fact the results haunted him for the rest of his life. But, he asserted, the gold he panned were the stories that came out of these experiences.

After the Klondike his life changed. Here was a guy with virtually no contacts, who was down and out. He was writing stories and sending them to magazines and newspapers until he finally had an article accepted and was paid \$25, which was a pretty good amount of money then. In the 1890's the pulp magazines became a primary means of entertainment. There was a growing literate audience who appreciated stories and London had a wonderful talent for keeping readers' attention. He wrote hundreds of stories. He wrote westerns, science fiction, adventure stories, stories about the Klondike, he wrote anything that would sell. He was proud he always wrote at least a thousand words a day. It's amazing he had that kind of discipline. In addition, he wrote letters and his correspondence eventually became immense. By the end of the nineties he had been down and out, but in 1900 he earned \$2500 which biographers say was equivalent to \$75,000 today. In 1903 he wrote *Call of the Wild*, the novel that made him famous.

At this time he became very involved in socialist activities. He considered his primary philosophy the need for the destruction of the capitalist system. The Socialist Movement was relatively strong then. Eugene Debs, who knew London, was a well known leader. London ran for Mayor of Oakland and though he didn't get many votes, he did receive a lot of attention. He met writer Emma Goldman and other activists. He became one of the best known Socialist advocates. As part of this activity he was a strong critic of religion. He felt that religion really was "The opiate of the people," that preaching aimed to keep the common man down, and it was "pie in the sky when you die." His criticism of religion tended to be less philosophical and more practical. He accepted religion as one primary means keeping people from rising out of their bad situations.

– Reported by George Maurer





## **Atheists arise: Dawkins spreads the A-word among America's unbelievers**

Author outlines campaign to give godless a voice. New organisation appeals to 'downtrodden' millions.

Ewen MacAskill in Washington, *The Guardian*, 1 October 1, 2007

It is like Daniel going into the lions' den, though Professor Richard Dawkins might not appreciate the biblical comparison. Britain's leading atheist is spearheading a campaign in America to challenge the dominance of religion in every day life and in politics, insisting that the millions of US godless deserve to be heard too.

Atheists in the US "have been downtrodden for a very long time. So I think some sort of political organisation is what they need", he said. Maybe David and Goliath would be a better analogy. Religion is palpable in US schools, places of work and public institutions. God is invoked by soldiers and politicians in a way that would seem inappropriate in Britain. George Bush used God as one of the reasons for invading Iraq. In Congress, where godlessness can equate with being unelectable, only one representative, Pete Stark, is prepared to admit to being a non-believer. According to a study published last year by the University of Minnesota, Americans distrust atheists more than any other minority group, including homosexuals, recent immigrants or Muslims.

Now the best-selling author of *The God Delusion* and chair of public understanding of science at Oxford has set up an organisation to help atheists round the world, including the US. In an interview with the *Guardian*, he said: "When you think about how fantastically successful the Jewish lobby has been, though, in fact, they are less numerous I am told - religious Jews anyway - than atheists and yet they more or less monopolise American foreign policy as far as many people can see. So if atheists could achieve a small fraction of that influence, the world would be a better place."

His organisation, established two months ago, complete with T-shirts bearing a large red A, is the Out Campaign. "It does not mean outing, definitely not ... we want to encourage people to come out because there is a big closet population of atheists who need to come out." His estimates, which square broadly with official data, show that atheists in the US account for about 10% of the population. "I have had many letters from people saying 'I don't dare give my opinions. I am afraid of my family. I am afraid of my wife, I am afraid of my husband. I am afraid of my work people. I am afraid of being fired'."

Prof Dawkins appeared as one of the stars of the Atheist

Alliance convention in Crystal City, Virginia, at the weekend. He admitted he was "a little bit hesitant" about being an Englishman talking to Americans and he showed "a certain amount of deference" when asked about US politics. "But I think that this country is so powerful and what goes on politically here is so enormously influential, the rest of the world is entitled to have a say. We don't get the vote here but I think people are entitled to express an opinion." Although religious groups denounce him on websites and radio talkshows, he has not received abuse at public meetings; religious people tended not to turn up - "which in a way is a shame", he said.

What did he hope an atheist bloc in the US might achieve? "I would free children from being indoctrinated with the religion of their parents or their community. I would like to free everyone from the assumption you have to be religious in order to be a decent person or to be moral. Obviously stem cell research and all the interference with scientific research that goes on [should stop]. Obviously the whole creationist interference with education [should stop] but I think, more positively, I would like to see people encouraged to rejoice in the world in which they find themselves, the universe in which they have been born, to take full advantage of the tiny slice of eternity they have been granted."

He had been encouraged by the apparent distancing of Republican candidates for the 2008 presidential race from the Christian right. But he found "very depressing" the profession of faith from all the Democratic candidates. "I guess the Democrats have to pretend to be more pious than the Republicans because they are under suspicion of not being."

### **Darwin's Rottweiler**

Richard Dawkins' vocal insistence on the pre-eminence of science (he is nicknamed Darwin's Rottweiler) and his rigorous attempts to dismantle notions of faith and belief have earned him many critics, from those who complain about his evangelising tone to those who confidently predict he will spend eternity in hellfire. His latest work, *The God Delusion*, incensed believers with its insistence on the hypocrisy and unreliability of scripture and its lampooning of creationists. It also annoyed some in the scientific community for suggesting that few top scientists believed in God and that separating the rational and the religious was intellectually impossible. In particular, Dawkins is angry at the way children are indoctrinated into faiths and takes issue with the unimpeachable taboos that protect religions from rational scrutiny.





## Teacher: "I was fired," said "Bible isn't literal."

by Megan Hawkins, *Des Moines Register* (22 September 2007)

A community college instructor in Red Oak claims he was fired after he told his students that the biblical story of Adam and Eve should not be literally interpreted. Steve Bitterman, 60, said officials at Southwestern Community College sided with a handful of students who threatened legal action over his remarks in a western civilization class Tuesday. He said he was fired Thursday. "I'm just a little bit shocked myself that a college in good standing would back up students who insist that people who have been through college and have a master's degree, a couple actually, have to teach that there were such things as talking snakes or lose their job," Bitterman said.

Sarah Smith, director of the school's Red Oak campus, declined to comment Friday on Bitterman's employment status. The school's president, Barbara Crittenden, said Bitterman taught one course at Southwest. She would not comment, however, on his claim that he was fired over the Bible reference, saying it was a personnel issue. "I can assure you that the college understands our employees' free-speech rights," she said. "There was no action taken that violated the First Amendment."

Bitterman, who taught part time at Southwestern and Omaha's Metropolitan Community College, said he uses the Old Testament in his western civilization course and always teaches it from an academic standpoint. Bitterman's Tuesday course was telecast to students in Osceola over the Iowa Communications Network. A few students in the Osceola classroom, he said, thought the lesson was "denigrating their religion." "I put the Hebrew religion on the same plane as any other religion. Their god wasn't given any more credibility than any other god," Bitterman said. "I told them it was an extremely meaningful story, but you had to see it in a poetic, metaphoric or symbolic sense, that if you took it literally, that you were going to miss a whole lot of meaning there."

Bitterman said he called the story of Adam and Eve a "fairy tale" in a conversation with a student after the class and was told the students had threatened to see an attorney. He declined to identify any of the students in the class. "I just thought there was such a thing as academic freedom here," he said. "From my point of view, what they're doing is essentially teaching their students very well to function in the eighth century."

Hector Avalos, an atheist religion professor at Iowa State University, said Bitterman's free-speech rights were violated if he was fired simply because he took an academic approach



to a Bible story. "I don't know the circumstances, but if he's teaching something about the Bible and says it is a myth, he shouldn't be fired for that because most academic scholars do believe this is a myth, the story of Adam and Eve," Avalos said. "So it'd be no different than saying the world was not created in six days in science class. "You don't fire professors for giving you a scientific answer."

Bitterman said Linda Wild, vice president of academic affairs at Southwest, fired him over the telephone. Wild did not return telephone or e-mail messages Friday. Bitterman said that he can think of no other reason college officials would fire him and that Smith, the director of the campus, has previously sat in on his classes and complimented his work. "As a taxpayer, I'd like to know if a tax-supported public institution of higher learning has given veto power over what can and cannot be said in its classrooms to a fundamentalist religious group," he said. "If it has ... then the taxpaying public of Iowa has a right to know. What's next? Whales talk French at the bottom of the sea?"

Reporter Megan Hawkins can be reached at (515) 284-8169 or <mehawkins@dmreg.com>



British National Secular Society

## Secularist of the Year presentation 2007

This year's ,5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year will be presented at a glittering lunchtime event in central London by Richard Dawkins. Organised by the National Secular Society, the annual prize is awarded to the person or organisation adjudged to have contributed significantly to the cause of secularism.

On this year's shortlist are:

- Matthew Parris** - columnist on the Times of London
- Kenan Malik** - commentator
- Oliver Kamm** - political pundit
- Johann Hari** - *Independent* journalist
- Mina Ahadi** - founder of the Ex-Muslim Council of Germany
- Sam Harris** - author of *The End of Faith*
- Michel Onfray** - author of *In Defence of Atheism*
- Peter Tatchell** - human rights activist
- Index on Censorship** - for defence of free expression



## The Religious Right's New Tactics for Invading Public Schools

By Rob Boston, *Church and State* Posted on October 4, 2007 on <http://www.alternet.org/story/64211/>



In mid-August, Texas Gov. Rick Perry signed something called the "Religious Viewpoints Antidiscrimination Act" into law. Although the new law has an innocuous-sounding title, it's really a ticking time-bomb, opponents say. The law requires every public school in the state to adopt a policy guaranteeing students' right to religious expression. It mandates that schools create "limited public forums" for religious and other types of speech. A student could, for example, read the morning announcements over a loudspeaker and then lapse into a prayer or mini-sermon.

Many people think the law is yet another effort to get around the Supreme Court's rulings on separation of church and state in public schools -- and they're expecting a torrent of litigation to result.

"This law is fundamentally at odds with the principle of religious freedom," said Kathy Miller, president of the Texas Freedom Network, an Austin-based group that opposes the machinations of the Religious Right. "It will force public school students to participate in public events that promote religious views -- through prayer or even proselytizing -- that they and their families may not share or may even find deeply offensive. So rather than protecting religious freedom, this law represents a grave threat to it." "Rather than providing schools with training and appropriate guidelines for protecting First Amendment freedoms," Miller said, "legislators decided to play politics with our children's faith. So now they have recklessly put local schools and their taxpayers at risk of expensive lawsuits."

The law is of dubious constitutionality, and some school officials in the state are exasperated. Charles Perkins, Abilene Independent School District's assistant superintendent, told the Abilene Reporter-News, "I really do feel like the state law has been very confusing. It's opened some doors that no one thought to go through." Perkins added, "Really and truly, we're just trying to have school, and I think this is a complicating factor."

The Texas law, which was drafted and promoted by a Religious Right group called the Liberty Legal Institute, is yet another salvo in a long-running battle in America over the proper place of religion in public schools. The Supreme Court ruled 45 years ago that public schools may not sponsor prayer, Bible reading and other forms of religious worship. Rulings since then have generally extended that principle, while protecting truly voluntary religious activity in the schools. But some people have never made their peace with

the school prayer rulings. After the decisions were handed down in 1962 and '63, numerous constitutional amendments were introduced in Congress to "restore" prayer to schools. They have been a permanent fixture on the political scene since then, although none has passed.

Frustrated, Religious Right advocates are adopting new strategies to bring state-sanctioned fundamentalist outreach into the schools. The Texas law, critics say, is merely a new twist on an old fight.

It's not the only one. As another school year got under way last month, public schools around the nation found themselves under siege by groups obsessed with using the schools as instruments of evangelism. The Texas law reflects the Religious Right's latest ploy: drafting students as evangelists to preach to a captive audience of their peers. The groups hope that the courts will consider the prayers and sermons offered during the "limited public forum" as a form of free speech that is, technically, not sponsored by the school.



### Media Events/Programs

#### The Humanist Perspective

Show times for **The Humanist Perspective** on Cable Channel 4: Tuesday 9:30 am and Thursday 7:00 pm  
Channel 24: Friday 11:30 pm

#### Programs

- 229 Introducing CFI-*On Campus*, with Zachary Miner
- 238 Is America a Christian Nation? with D. Koepsell, S. Crampton
- 237 The True Believer, with Dave Puls
- 240 Rock for Relief, with Sarah Jordan, David Koepsell

#### Hear, hear: *Answers in Atheism* at

<[www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net)>

Doesn't it just Figger? (pun intended). Some of your fellows have been up to something good and useful. Frank Bicknell, Helen Kagin, Edwin Kagin, John and Fran Welte have been hard at work on an internet radio show start up, called *Answers in Atheism*. With six shows broadcast, we are starting to think we are achieving something! Although we have no budget, we are determined to succeed in making an impression! Please volunteer to assist us, contact John or Fran (production or operations), Frank (engineering) or Edwin and Helen (hosts and famous atheists). Of course, financial assistance is also welcome, as we are in desperate need of higher bandwidth and various technical materials. We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time of your choice.

Please tune in at [www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew



## Jesus painting can stay in La. courthouse

By Associated Press; 10 September 2007

NEW ORLEANS - A picture of Jesus can remain on the wall at a south Louisiana courthouse because it is now just one among many portraits of legal icons, a federal judge ruled September 7. U.S. District Judge Ivan Lemelle said he would have ordered the picture removed had it remained prominently on display by itself in the city courthouse lobby in Slidell, across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

The American Civil Liberties had gone to court wanting him to do just that. "As much as we might like the image - I might make a copy and frame it in my house," Lemelle said. "But I'm not going to display it in my courtroom" or in the courthouse lobby.

The revised display is constitutional, Lemelle said. The current display, which puts the disputed picture at the end of a row of portraits, was hung Aug. 31. The ACLU filed its lawsuit in July. Both Marjorie Esman, who became executive director of the state ACLU on Sept. 4, and Mike Johnson, who represented the Slidell City Court, claimed victory. "We would not concede that they won anything," said Johnson, who works for a conservative Christian legal group called the Alliance Defense Fund and often argues against the ACLU in Louisiana. "I think the message today is the ACLU cannot bully local officials," Johnson said.

Esman said Lemelle vindicated the ACLU. "We consider it an absolute victory," she said. Not only did the judge say the picture by itself was a religious display, but "the judge ruled that it was our lawsuit that prompted them to change it," she said. The picture is now shown with 15 other people in legal history through the ages. They include Mohammed, who is shown holding the Koran, Charlemagne, Napoleon and King Louis IX of France. It originally hung in the center of the wall above the words "To know peace, obey these laws," in metal letters. A copy of the Constitution now holds that spot, above the same statement.

Lemelle said one legal question remains C whether the city must pay the ACLU's legal fees. The judge said that could be the case because the group's lawsuit was what prompted the change. He scheduled a hearing on that question Oct. 18. The former judge who bought the picture said in a sworn statement that he had no idea that it had any religious significance. "To me at the time it appeared to be a depiction of a lawgiver," retired Judge James R. Strain Jr. said. Lemelle, who noted several times during the hearing that the picture showed someone with a halo, said he wasn't questioning Strain's veracity. "But it's a halo. You can tell him I said that," he told Johnson.



## THE FOCUS

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**Editor:** Kenneth Bronstein

*The Focus* provides links to articles collected from major newspapers and magazines, and is emailed weekly.

*This Week in Atheism* is a cable show that discusses the articles featured, every Wednesday at 6:30 PM (EST), Manhattan Cable station 57. Live streaming is available at: - <http://www.mnn.org>

Comments, suggestions and subscription:  
[focus@centerforatheism.org](mailto:focus@centerforatheism.org) (<mailto:focus@centerforatheism.org>) .

## Ezekiel's Crazy Bread

{A recipe from the Bible, Ezekiel 4:9-15}

Ezekiel the priest was quite insane.  
Such crazy things conceived within his brain.  
Creatures with four mugs, half man, half beast.  
Each face with dreadful eyes, seven at least.  
And wings so huge they made a mighty roar,  
Loins up, loins down, horrendous fire and more.  
Ezekiel loved his god, and he was lead  
To follow well god' recipe for bread.  
Use human dung, with barley, wheat and beans.  
All Jews must eat this bread, though foul it seems  
"Please, god, don't make us use that human dung -  
You know that I've each day your praises sung.  
I cannot stomach human dung these days!"  
God said, "You may use cow dung." Begging pays.  
Now, why did god force them to eat such bread?  
"To punish their iniquity," he said.  
The Bible god is sure a mean old cuss!  
His regulations cruel and numerous!

Dorothy B. Thompson

## The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Tuesday, 20 November at 8:00PM

**Where:** Joseph-Beth Booksellers

2692 Madison Rd. Rookwood Pavillion

Cincinnati OH 45207; 513-396-8966

To see who's coming and to see more event details: [http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1\\_ve](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve)



## The Theodicy Problem: No Problem for An Atheist

"On Faith" panelist Susan Jacoby is the author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, (2004) which was named a notable nonfiction book by *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and cited as an outstanding international book by the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Guardian*.

This question is really the only question for anyone who believes in God (loving or otherwise), and its unanswerability is the main reason why I, and every other atheist I know, can never accept the existence of any deity.

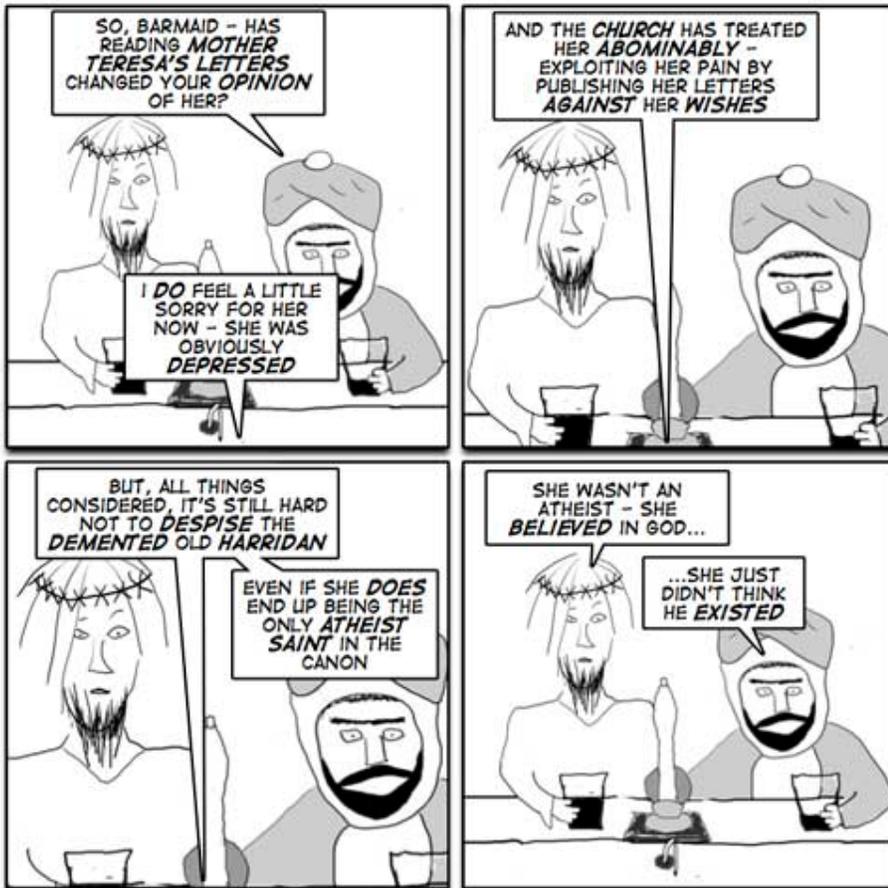
The only answer offered by believers is that God gives man free will and that it is our fault--not God's--when bad things happen to good people. This is not an answer at all because it does not address the question of why the innocent should suffer for the exercise of "free will" by the guilty. And of course, natural disasters are completely outside the scope of the free will argument--unless you believe that God gave wind, water, and rocks free will.

People always ask atheists how they can get through the pain and hardships of life without believing in a God who will one day wipe away all tears. After one of my lectures, I had a conversation with a woman whose son had died of cancer at age twelve, and she spoke eloquently on this point. She said

that she had joined a support group for parents grieving over the deaths of their children and that she soon realized she was better off, as an atheist, than the religious parents who kept asking why God would take the lives of their innocent youngsters. "I saw cancer as a malignant, random act of nature," she said, "but I never had to ask why, because I don't believe in a benevolent being who oversees the universe. I didn't ask, 'Why him?' or 'Why me?'" because there is no reason. I didn't have to be angry at God, as these people were, on top of my grief."

The gulf between believers and atheists on this point is unbridgeable. Whenever I hear survivors of natural disasters thanking God for sparing their lives and their homes, I feel nothing but amazement and incomprehension. How can anyone possibly see his neighbor's house destroyed by a tornado and think that a deity had something to do with sparing his own house? What utter arrogance is embodied in such beliefs! As for the victims, the idea that "God must have his reasons" is the embodiment of utter passivity, a survival from the infancy of the human race. There are reasons, and they have nothing to do with gods and everything to do with the human capacity for evil and the indifference of nature.

If there were a deity responsible for both human evil and impersonal natural disasters, I would hate him. I would prefer to go to hell rather than to make bargains with such a cruel, capricious Master of the Universe. ❧



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## SCIENCE BOOK CLUB:

### 2007 Schedule

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday because of holidays or other conflicts as noted below:



### Nov. 18 (3rd Sunday)

- *What we believe but cannot prove : today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* edited by John Brockman

Dec. 16 (3rd Sunday) - *The Republican war on science* by Chis Mooney



## Bush Appointee Campaigns for Evangelicals

By Aaron Glantz, Copyright © 2007 IPS-Inter Press Service.

SAN FRANCISCO (IPS) - The head of the U.S. federal government agency that doles out benefits to disabled veterans is under fire for saying Bible study is "more important than doing [my] job."

Two organisations, Veterans for Common Sense (VCS) and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), demanded an investigation Tuesday of Daniel Cooper, President George W. Bush's undersecretary for benefits at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Their complaint stems from an appearance Cooper made in a fundraising video for the evangelical group Christian Embassy, which carries out missionary work among the Washington elite as part of the Campus Crusade for Christ. In the video, Cooper says of his Bible study, "it's not really about carving out time, it really is a matter of saying what is important. And since that's more important than doing the job -- the job's going to be there, whether I'm there or not."

Veterans for Common Sense and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation believe Cooper violated the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits government officials from advocating a particular religion while on the job. They also believe Cooper violated ethics rules that prohibit government officials from using their name, picture, or title for proselytising or fundraising.

"We're very concerned about this because hundreds of thousands of veterans are waiting for their benefits while Cooper himself says that promoting his religion is more important than helping the veterans," Veterans for Common Sense's Paul Sullivan told IPS. Since Cooper was appointed the head of the Veterans Benefits Administration, the number of veterans waiting on their disability claims has increased dramatically, from 325,000 in 2002 to 600,000 today. On average, a U.S. war veteran must wait six months for an answer to their application. If a vet decides to appeal a denial, the process often drags on as long as three years. In addition, Veterans Administration hospitals, clinics and counseling centers report that more than 52,000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But under Cooper's leadership, only 19,000 of those veterans were approved for service-connected disability compensation for PTSD, a significant discrepancy.

The groups are also upset that Cooper gave his top aid, Ronald Aument, the deputy secretary for benefits, a 33,000-dollar cash bonus while the claims backlog grew larger. "He's prostituting his position," argued Mikey Weinstein, the head

of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. "We could have done just as poorly as he's done by sticking a German Shepard or a cactus in that job."

Sullivan and Weinstein turned to the Federal Bureau of Investigation after the Veterans Administration's own inspector general cleared Cooper of any wrongdoing. "We made a referral to the designated agency ethics official," said Cathy Gromek, a spokeswoman for the VA inspector general's office. "He reviewed the video, and he determined that conduct portrayed in the video did not violate federal laws or regulations." When asked to provide a copy of the inspector's report, Gromek told IPS it was not readily available. A request would need to be made under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), she said -- a bureaucratic process that often takes weeks, or even months. Veterans for Common Sense has already filed a formal request for the report, but whatever it shows, the organisation's director Paul Sullivan told IPS the FBI still needs to get involved. "It's like the fox guarding the henhouse," Sullivan said. "VA's Inspector General, who is a political appointee, should not be investigating other political appointees within his own department."

Daniel Cooper wasn't the only high ranking official in the Christian Embassy video. The video also featured Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson and a slew of current and retired Pentagon officials, including Army brigadier generals Vincent Brooks and Robert Caslen, retired Army Chaplain Col. Ralph Benson, and Air Force major generals Peter Sutton and John Catton. Long time observers of the religious right say the controversy surrounding Daniel Cooper is part of a pattern.

"Evangelicals have been working through the military and government agencies since the Cold War as part of the fight against 'Godless Communism', but they tried to follow certain boundaries" said Chip Berlet, a senior analyst of Political Research Associates in Boston. "With the Bush administration we've seen many egregious examples of officials stepping way out of line of any kind of boundary, of which this promotional video is a particularly notable example." In 2005, for example, the group Americans United for the Separation of Church and State issued a report accusing officials at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs of religious discrimination. Cadets were frequently pressured to attend chapel and take part of evangelical services, the group said, with prayer part of mandatory events at the academy. In at least one case, the group said, a teacher ordered students to pray before beginning their final examination.





## How the Public Resolves Conflicts Between Faith and Science. On Subjects such as Evolution, Many Americans Are Aware of -- but Reject -- the Scientific Consensus

by David Masci, Senior Research Fellow, *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*; 27 August 2007

The relationship between faith and science in the United States seems, at least on the surface, to be paradoxical. Surveys repeatedly show that most Americans respect science and the benefits it brings to society, such as new technologies and medical treatments. And yet, religious convictions limit many Americans' willingness to accept controversial scientific theories as well as certain types of scientific research, such as the potential use of embryonic stem cells for medical treatments.

Science and religion have traditionally, and often incorrectly, been viewed as enemies. This perception has been fueled in part by a number of famous episodes in history that have pitted scientists, like Galileo and Darwin, against the prevailing religious establishments of their time. But more often than not, scientists and people of faith have operated not at cross purposes but simply at different purposes.

Today the situation is much the same. Certainly, there are modern scientists who are actively hostile to religious belief. British biologist Richard Dawkins, for instance, in his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, argues that many social ills from bigotry to ignorance - can be blamed, at least in part, on religion. In addition, a significant number of scientists (roughly a third according to a 2006 Rice University survey of more than 750 professors in the natural sciences) do not believe in God, compared with only one-in-twenty in the general population. But regardless of their personal views, most scientists tend to view the two disciplines as distinct, with each attempting to answer different kinds of questions using different methods. The late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould famously referred to this complementary relationship as "non-overlapping magisteria."

But there are times when the "magisteria" do overlap. The debate over the origins and development of life is the most compelling example of this. All but a small number of scientists regard Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection as an established fact. And yet, a substantial majority of Americans, many of whom are deeply religious, reject the notion that life evolved through natural forces alone.

Indeed, according to a 2006 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 42% of Americans reject the notion that life on earth evolved and believe instead that humans and other living things have always existed in their present form. Among white evangelical Protestants - many of whom

regard the Bible as the inerrant word of God 65% hold this view. Moreover, in the same poll, 21% of those surveyed say that although life has evolved, these changes were guided by a supreme being. Only a minority, about a quarter (26%) of respondents, say that they accept evolution through natural processes or natural selection alone.

Interestingly, many of those who reject natural selection recognize that scientists themselves fully accept Darwin's theory. In the same 2006 Pew poll, nearly two-thirds of adults (62%) say that they believe that scientists agree on the validity of evolution. Moreover, Americans, including religious Americans, hold science and scientists in very high regard. A 2006 survey conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University found that most people (87%) think that scientific developments make society better. Among those who describe themselves as being very religious, the same proportion (87%) share that opinion.

So what is at work here? How can Americans say that they respect science and even know what scientists believe and yet still disagree with the scientific community on some fundamental questions? The answer is that much of the general public simply chooses not to believe the scientific theories and discoveries that seem to contradict long-held religious or other important beliefs.

When asked what they would do if scientists were to disprove a particular religious belief, nearly two-thirds (64%) of people say they would continue to hold to what their religion teaches rather than accept the contrary scientific finding, according to the results of an October 2006 *Time* magazine poll. Indeed, in a May 2007 Gallup poll, only 14% of those who say they do not believe in evolution cite lack of evidence as the main reason underpinning their views; more people cite their belief in Jesus (19%), God (16%) or religion generally (16%) as their reason for rejecting Darwin's theory.

This reliance on religious faith may help explain why so many people do not see science as a direct threat to religion. Only 28% of respondents in the same *Time* poll say that scientific advancements threaten their religious beliefs. These poll results also show that more than four-fifths of respondents (81%) say that "recent discoveries and advances" in science have not significantly impacted their religious views. In fact, 14% say that these discoveries have actually made them more religious. Only 4% say that science has made them less religious.

These data once again show that, in the minds of most people in the United States, there is no real clash between science and religion. And when the two realms offer seemingly contradictory explanations (as in the case of evolution), religious people, who make up a majority of Americans, may rely primarily upon their faith for answers. ☞



BOOK REVIEW

40 days and 40 nights.

Darwin, Intelligent Design, God, Oxy Contin, and other Oddities on Trial in Pennsylvania

by Matthew Chapman (New York: HarperCollins Pub, 2007)

The subject of this book is the trial Kitzmiller vs. Dover Board of Education in Pennsylvania about teaching Intelligent Design in the public schools.

Chapman not only sat through the trial, afterward he interviewed most of the persons involved. And, unlike in a novel, in the real world a large number of people have a say.

Among the plaintiff parents there is one bona fide genuine atheist, but she keeps that thinking in the closet, one person is exploring Buddhism, and a longtime, unmarried couple.

Chapman speculates a good deal about the mendacity

of the expert ID proponents, most of whom actually never testified. Why do the Discovery Institute and its money men ride into battle against evolution and science in general.

Or is it a matter of education? Among the main line churches members of the clergy are expected to pass through college and develop some intellectual sophistication.

Another Great Awakening is under way, which will, as always, insist that the intellect sink into a coma as great bloodshed ensues.

In the end Chapman advocates ID be taught in schools, exactly as it was dissected in the Kitzmiller vs Dover case.

Poetic Quote - Wolf Roder
Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of mankind is man.
Alexander Pope (1688-1744)



No December Potluck  
 November Potluck:  
 Tuesday Nov. 13, 2007 6:30 PM



No November Meeting  
 December Meeting  
 Tuesday, Dec. 11, 2007 7:00 PM



FIG Leaves  
 P.O. Box 19034  
 Cincinnati, OH 45219

# FIG

## Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



*To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.*

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail [figinfo@gofigger.org](mailto:figinfo@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).